

**Interview with former battalion surgeon LT Michael Keleher, MC USNR, present at Kwajalein, Saipan, Tinian, and Iwo Jima. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 23 and 26 June 1997.**

**Where did you go to medical school?**

I graduated from the University of Colorado Medical School which is in Denver in 1940.

**Where are you from?**

My home was in Denver, born and raised there. East to us in Denver is the Mississippi River. When I was there it was a small town of about 300,000 people. I guess it's a million and half or more now. I lived in south Denver and there were long areas of vacant lots and empty space between there and the University of Denver which was where I went to pre-med school. Then it was way out in the country. Now it's surrounded by town and country schools and shopping centers. It's not the same place I left. Denver is just part of my history now.

**You eventually joined the Navy. In your book you said you tried the Army first but they found you too thin.**

After graduating from the University of Colorado, I went to an internship at the University of Iowa at Iowa City and anybody that doesn't know Iowa City is amazed at the size of the hospital. It was a 1000-bed hospital when I went there and it's now about a 2000-bed hospital. It's huge. I was there for a junior internship and then stayed on for a senior internship, my beginning of my surgical residency. It was in 1942 that I went into the Navy. I applied to the Army, which everybody else did. A lot of the medical staff of the hospital were already in the reserve and had already been called to duty. The ones who were left had double work to do. I was busy working 15, 16, 17 hours a day every day. I applied to the Army because everybody was applying to the service and my number on the Selective Service was very low--54--so I knew I would be called very soon; 54 out of a thousand. The Army turned me down. I still have the letter--for reason of "physical unfitness." It was a form letter and they filled in the blank. I was 14 pounds underweight. Considering the fact that I was working double shifts 16 hours a day didn't look like I was physically unqualified. I was 6 feet tall and weighed about 140 pounds. I told them, "I'm skinny; I'd be hard to hit with a bullet." The Selective Service board was not very much impressed. They told me they would defer me for 6 months and I should apply to the Navy. They said the Navy would take anybody. And that's what I did and the Navy took me.

That was in 1942. When I had applied to the Army in the summer of '41 war hadn't been declared yet. In June of '42 my commission came through in the Navy as a junior grade lieutenant. My first orders were to Great Lakes Training Center, which wasn't too far away from Iowa City near Chicago.

I was designated an assistant surgeon and I thought this was great. I would be working in surgery. Well they gave me a whole ward of measles and a whole ward of mumps, which was new to me. I learned a whole lot about measles and mumps in the 3 weeks I was there. I didn't do any surgery. That was about as far away from surgery as I could get.

But I enjoyed it. A lot of the young doctors who were assigned there temporarily were being reassigned to ships-- destroyers, cruisers and so on. I thought this was great. It was better than being in the Army where you have to sleep on the ground. Well they assigned me to the Fleet Marine Force, New River, NC. So help me, when I went to get my ticket for transportation

down there from the quartermaster, he didn't even know where it was. It wasn't in any of the books that he had. It was brand new. He gave me ticket to a town nearby and told me I was on my own and I had to get to where I was going.

When I got there they assigned me to the Twenty-third Marines, Third Battalion of the Third Marine Division. That was in July 1942. It was hotter than Billy be damned down there. Have you ever been to the east coast of North Carolina in the summertime? It is hot and humid with lots of mosquitoes. When I got there the Jacksonville was a town with less than a thousand people, a crossroads where one of the roads wasn't even paved. Now it's a city of about 30,000 people, not counting the Marine Corps base.

**When you were assigned to the Marines, what were your feelings? Were you puzzled by the assignment?**

To tell you the truth I didn't even know the Marines were part of the Navy. On the train trip from Chicago down there, the *Saturday Evening Post* came out with a lead article entitled "Specialists in Sudden Death." It was about the Marines at Camp Lejeune. And that didn't put my mind at ease. Here I was going in with a bunch of guys who were being taught how to kill each other.

Later on, after I got there, a lot of the medical officers were assigned to some training so they would know what they were doing when they got to the Marine Corps side of it. But by that time we had been there for several months and they had decided they couldn't teach us anything more than we knew already so...

**Medically speaking.**

Medically speaking as far as tropical diseases and so on. So I didn't have to go.

**In your book, you mention an outbreak of food poisoning.**

Oh yes. That was quite interesting. There was a small hospital there on base in Tent Camp. We were assigned to Tent Camp. Actually the base had not been completed. Even the general's quarters had not been finished. The Twenty-third Marines were assigned to Tent Camp which was on the far side of Jacksonville and it was just a series of pyramidal tents and there were some quonset huts for the mess halls. Looking back at it, we decided that this food epidemic started the night before when they had boiled a bunch of hams to be served for lunch the next day and they hadn't refrigerated them. They left them out all night and they started lunch about 11 o'clock and 20 minutes later they'd serve another bunch of marines, and then 20 minutes later another bunch. The first mess hall started getting sick first and then 20 minutes later, the next mess hall, and so on. They were violently ill--nausea and vomiting and very sick--collapsing. So we sent out to the field and got these guys in before they started getting sick. Many times they were not sick yet until they got to the hospital so we did get a head start on some of them. And all this was in the summertime. It was a nightmare. They sent these 2 1/2-ton trucks out and loaded the sick marines into them like logs and brought them into this little hospital. After two or three truckloads we had two or three marines in every bed, under the bed, in the halls, on the lawn outside, all nauseated and vomiting. We were lucky we didn't lose anybody. It was a mess.

That lasted all the rest of that day. We gave the worse ones intravenous fluids and morphine to allay their crampy abdominal discomfort. We found out later that it was the bad ham. It was salmonella. They sent a crew down from Washington to check it all out and all this

information came out several days later when they had all the cultures back. We had well over a thousand sick marines. Imagine that many marines lying around nauseated and vomiting. We were frightened that we would lose some of them.

**What were your specific responsibilities in these early days of your Marine Corps career?**

My first duty was assistant battalion surgeon to the Third Battalion, Twenty-third Marines, Third Marine Division. There were about a thousand marines in the battalion. Our job was to keep them healthy, give them their shots. Most of these guys were 17 or 18 years old, just young, healthy men. We had to keep their health records up to date. We held a daily sick call because when you get a thousand men who are working hard in the field, a lot of them get sick--poison ivy, injuries, sprains, and so on. We took care of them. If we couldn't care of them and the problem was more than we could take care of we'd send them to the division hospital.

We'd also carry on our sanitary inspections of the latrines, mess halls, and the tents. It was enough to keep us busy. There were two doctors. I was assistant to the battalion surgeon and the assistant battalion surgeon.

**What was the organization of the medical battalion?**

There were three battalions in the regiment and then a headquarters and heavy weapons battalion so there were actually four battalions. Two doctors were assigned to each battalion and about 20 corpsmen, usually with a chief pharmacist's mate and a first class pharmacist's mate, and then the others were lower ranks. The headquarters had two doctors, a battalion surgeon and his assistant and about another 20 to take care of the headquarters, heavy weapons, and motor pool. In addition, we'd give lectures to our corpsmen trying to get them upgraded. We'd give lectures to the Marines about what they would be running into in their tropical environment because we knew we were going to go to the Pacific. One class that we had to attend was in arctic medicine, for crying out loud. I don't know where they thought we were going, up north to Alaska maybe.

But we were pretty sure we were going to the Pacific because by that time Guadalcanal had taken place and we were very much worried because the Marines there were fighting for their lives at that time. They were almost abandoned. I have a good friend here in Ashville. In fact, he was our executive officer for awhile who was on Guadalcanal and he was carried off as a stretcher patient, not from a wound but from malaria.

**You said that as far as specialized medical training was concerned, you already had a lot of that. Did you receive any type of combat training?**

We trained right along with the Marines. I assigned two corpsmen to each company. Actually it was more than that. Each squad had a corpsman. They did their hiking or marching. They didn't carry a weapon at that time but carried their Hospital Corps stuff which was as heavy as carrying a rifle or the baseplate of a mortar.

**As the surgeon, did you get any kind of special weapons training at all?**

Yes. I fired for effect on the rifle range but didn't do very well. I didn't get marksman but I did hit the bullseye a couple of times. We had a carbine which could fire a lot of bullets but it wasn't very accurate. I didn't like it. I sent away and had an uncle of mine buy me a .45 automatic and I carried it the whole time. I fired it once at Iwo. Somebody fired at me, I

wheeled and turned and fired in the general direction and got the heck out of there. On Iwo Jima, these guys would be in the tunnels. They'd go up through a trap door and fire and then go down through the trap door and you'd never know where they were. They were underground all the time.

**You eventually got a new assignment when you were transferred out of the Third Marine Division.**

Yes. I got there in July of '42 and we went through this training and then they took the whole regiment up to Chesapeake Bay for a real show, a landing on "defended beaches." And they had the whole shebang--naval gunfire, aerial bombardment, and then they landed their marines. Everything was so fouled up nobody knew what was going on. They even had congressmen down from Washington to see this highly trained Marine Corps unit.

Nobody ever told me this but I think we messed it up so bad they sent us all back to Camp Lejeune, divided us up into two cadres to form a new Third Division and a brand new Fourth Division. They assigned me to the Fourth Division and that's when I was assigned as battalion surgeon to the Third Battalion, Twenty-fifth Marines of the Fourth Marine Division.

**How was this assignment different from your previous one?**

It didn't differ at all except I had more responsibility. I was the battalion surgeon instead of the assistant. We went through the whole training program all over again. At the end of the year we were put on trucks and then took trains Quantico. Then we were put aboard ship and taken down through the Panama Canal around to the Pacific at San Diego and then trucked up to Camp Pendleton.

I went through training there from September '43 until the following January of '44. We were combat loaded at San Diego and went directly to Kwajalein. This was the first time the Marines had been combat loaded in the United States to land on an island without stopping. In fact they didn't let some of the marines off the ship to go on liberty in Honolulu.

**What ship did you go over on?**

It was a transport; I can't remember the name. It was a big ship. It took about half of the regiment. In fact, they had four ships for the entire regiment.

**How long did it take to get there?**

We crept along and this was a big convoy of dozens and dozens of ships. We had battleships and destroyers accompanying us. D minus 1 was December 31st. We landed 1 day before the attack on Roi and Namur.

**You were off the beaches there at Kwajalein. What were your impressions of this place you were about to land on?**

Kwajalein is a huge atoll--I don't know how many miles north to south. The two big islands in the north are Roi and Namur. The big island at the south--Kwajalein--was the island the Army took. We didn't have any contact with them at all. They were miles away from us. We went into the atoll and the atoll was very quiet compared to the open ocean. There were no big waves. We landed on D minus 1, the day before the big attack, on two side islands to the right of Namur. By the time we got ashore there wasn't anybody shooting back at us. There were only about a dozen Japanese on the islands and they were all dead by that time.

**I would guess there had been a strenuous bombardment before the landing.**

Oh yes, tremendous, or what we thought was tremendous. It didn't amount to much compared to what they did later on the other islands. There was aerial bombing and battleship and cruiser bombardment of the islands.

**And you could see all this from the deck?**

Yes. We had already landed on these two small islands which were just about 100 yards across--little tiny things--and the big attack on Roi and Namur was going to be the next morning. The battleships were bombarding it all night long. They were 5 or 10 miles out in the ocean and we could see the flashes of the guns. You couldn't hear any noise until the shells were overhead and then you could hear the whistling sounds, then the big explosions of the shells on Roi and Namur. And after all of that you heard a rumble that sounded like thunder from the explosion on the battleships. It took that long for the sound to reach us.

**So you were hearing and seeing the explosions on the island before you were hearing the guns going off.**

That's right. We had to realize what we were looking at and finally figured it out.

**You were closer to the beach than they were.**

Oh, gosh yes. We were only 8 or 900 yards away from the explosions and the ships were about 10 miles out in the ocean.

**And you were probably worried about short shots.**

At that time we were very much worried but they were very accurate. However, with all of the bombardment--naval and aerial--that had been taking place on the islands, there were a lot of shells that hadn't exploded. I mean dozens and dozens of shells all lying around. And we were walking on them. Some of them were 16-inch. A lot were smaller--14, 12, and smaller. But these things were big. We often wondered if a bomb had landed nearby it could have exploded some of the things we were standing on. When a shell couldn't be moved for some reason, they would get ready to detonate it. The cry would go out, "Fire in the hold," and everybody would jump into a foxhole and then 10 seconds later, they would explode this thing and it was a big explosion. If you've ever heard a 16-inch shell exploding, it is a big piece of dynamite.

We were in these little landing craft and we were near some of these smaller ships that were close in firing on Roi and Namur. As we would go underneath they would fire away. Those tremendous explosions, therefore, were right over our heads. I thought that was kind of dumb because I'm sure a lot of boys had their eardrums ruptured by the sound of those guns going off right above us.

**You say that the intensity of the fighting ashore was not high.**

We didn't have much of a problem at all. By the time the major part of our battalion landed, the few Japs that were defending those bitty islands were already dead. We didn't have any fight at all. But the next morning there was some resistance for a couple of hours until the Marines landed and they had eliminated any Japanese who were still alive.

**You mentioned in your book the explosion of the Japanese ammo dump. Did you actually witness that?**

I sure did. Let me tell you, I had a camera--against regulations, I might add--a little camera. I had taken it with me and I was at the north end of Namur, which is only about 500 or 600 yards across open water to Roi. And I had just taken a picture of the Marines landing on Namur. And this tremendous explosion blew everything up and dropped hunks of concrete and coral the size of barrels all around us. Some people were hurt by these fragments. There were more casualties in that incident than the whole operation put together. They were our casualties. I don't know how many Japanese were killed. Anybody near that was blasted.

**Was this naval gunfire that set this off?**

I have no idea. I suppose it was. They were still firing on the island and the Marines were just coming ashore. Maybe the Japanese set it off themselves.

**So, you had a little medical business to take care of at this point.**

Very little. A few boys got hit with pieces of concrete and so on. Actually, during the night, one of my corpsmen was killed by naval gunfire that landed too short and exploded in the tree under which he was sitting and blew the back of his head off. That was my first corpsman casualty.

**In combat you had specific medical tasks to perform. How did you fit into the overall evacuation chain?**

The doctors in the battalion are right up close. We were very close to the front lines--where the action is. We would get casualties within minutes of their being hit. They'd either walk back or be carried back. Sometimes they were stretcher cases, sometimes they were carried in the arms of a marine. But the Marines weren't supposed to stop doing what they were doing. They were to fight the war and the casualty evacuation was up to the hospital corpsmen. Sometimes we'd use cooks and other people that were not carrying a rifle to bring back the casualties. Our main job was to stop the bleeding, to treat pain. We'd had morphine syrettes. We had plasma to administer to people in shock. We had splints to splint long bone fractures and dressings and sulfa drugs. Then we'd evacuate them immediately back to the beach for evacuation by boat back to the hospital ships or to larger ships that had sick bays. We didn't keep the casualties at all. We stopped the bleeding, dressed the wound, splinted the fractures, treated the shock, and evacuated them promptly. We didn't do any definitive operations at all.

**Did you have enough plasma to work with?**

We always had enough plasma. We didn't have any blood. Occasionally, we'd get a unit of 0 negative blood but that had to be refrigerated even more than the plasma and we had no facilities for refrigeration.

**I know there was a dry form of plasma that had to be reconstituted with sterile water. Was this what you got?**

No. We had all liquid plasma.

**Where did you go after Kwajalein?**

After the battle, we stuck around Kwajalein for awhile because the atoll had--I don't know how many tiny islands--maybe 50 or 60. It formed like a necklace. The top two islands--Roi and Namur--and the bottom island, Kwajalein were about a mile across, but the rest of the islands were tiny spots of land. And people were living on them. We went down the chain to make sure there weren't any Japanese on any of these smaller islands. And that took another 10 days and then we got back aboard ship and went back to Maui. We didn't know where we were going but we had a base camp on Maui. Then we went through another whole period of training to get ready for Saipan.

**Was the training there at Maui pretty much the same as you had back in California?**

Pretty much although we had more training getting aboard ship. Getting aboard ship with all this gear we had to carry was quite an operation. We would have to go down these nets like a trapeze performer and get into this small boat which was bobbing around. Then we'd do our exercise on shore after we landed and then get back into the boat and up the net into the ship. We did that until we could do it in our sleep.

**Were these LCVPs you were landing in?**

Yes. It was not a big job when the seas were quiet but with the seas rough it was quite an acrobatic feat to get into the boat without the boat dropping away from you or coming up and hitting you pretty hard. You had to time your "let go" from the net just exactly right otherwise you would splash in the bottom of the boat. A lot of the boys were not badly hurt but they had sprains and bruises.

**And everyone had full packs.**

Yes. And the corpsmen had their packs. A corpsman's pack weighed about 25 pounds. They carried as much as any marine.

**One of the veterans told me that one of things you had to remember when you were going down these rope nets was to hold the vertical ropes and not the horizontal ones because you'd get your hands stepped on.**

That's right. You sure would. The horizontal ones were the steps. The vertical ropes were the hand holds. You learned that in a hurry.

**After that you were on your way to Saipan. Did you know where you were going?**

No. We didn't know where we were going until we got aboard ship. And they would bring out plans and maps so everybody knew exactly where they were going to land and what they were supposed to do in relation to everybody else. By that time we thought we were pretty smart marines.

**At Saipan you saw the same type of operation at the beginning as you had seen back at Kwajalein. Was it any different? Was it more intense?**

It was more intense but they had a larger target to shoot at. Saipan is a pretty good size island and the Marines didn't exactly where we were going to land although they pretty well guessed. We could have landed on either side of the island, for example. They deployed some of the ships to the far side instead of the west side to keep the Japanese guessing. The naval

gunfire and aerial bombardment was pretty intense until we landed and then the Japanese came out of their caves and threw everything in the books at us from field artillery to mortars and everything else. We had a lot of casualties on the beach.

**How did you get to the beach?**

We came aboard a landing craft with alligator treads which took us right up to the shore. We didn't have to get our feet wet.

**So you got up on the beach. I guess your first job was to set up an aid station.**

Yes. Ten minutes after we got ashore we became targets for a very intense bombardment. We must have had a couple of hundred shells thrown at this very small area. So we ran as fast as we could, carrying everything we could, I guess it was four or five hundred yards up to the site of an old railroad which gave us a little protection. I didn't do too much until I got there but then I set up an aid station on this side of the embankment from the railroad track. We stayed there overnight.

**Was it fairly well protected?**

It was fierily well protected from field artillery. They couldn't hit us but mortars would come down in a pretty vertical direction. They bombarded us off and on almost all night long. It was very intense until dark and then apparently they couldn't see what they were shooting at and then it was just off and on sporadically the rest of the night until daylight the next morning. And then it started again.

**What did you do for food?**

You just don't have much appetite in combat. The big problem was water. We carried enough water ashore to take care of us for a few hours but then they had to land water from the ships in big 5 and 10 gallon containers. The boys ate on the run. Nobody stopped to make a fire or anything. They just ate K- rations or whatever they could. There just wasn't any opportunity to do any cooking. There were no field kitchens, at least not for another day or two. After we had a little space and they could land some of these other pieces of kitchen equipment they set up and then we could pull the guys in small groups out of the front line to where they could get some hot food.

**How did you get the Silver Star?**

That happened on a night early in the campaign on D plus 4. We were in a rather large field. The Japanese still had the high ground and we were not in a very favorable spot. We were very exposed. About that time, they brought in a marine who had a very bad wound of his leg. His whole leg at the knee area had been shattered. I had my corpsman hold up a couple of ponchos and with a flashlight I completed the amputation. It didn't take much except a pair of scissors. The femur bone had already been shattered. I took the scissors to the soft tissues and used a couple of hemostats on some of the major vessels. I then gave him some morphine and a couple units of plasma, dressed the wound and then evacuated him. The whole thing didn't take 30 minutes. But if we didn't have the ponchos protecting the little flashlight I had we would have been casualties ourselves.

**The only light you had was the flashlight? There wasn't any ambient light?**

No. Just the flashlight. And it was a dark night. Anyway, the incident tickled the fancy of the colonel. The next day he heard that I had amputated this boy's leg under combat conditions, directly exposed to enemy fire and he thought that was great. Truly it was no more than what a lot of medical officers and even corpsmen had been doing all the way along. But they wrote it up and that's how I got my first Silver Star. Actually it wasn't a Silver Star at first. They gave me a Navy and Marine Corps medal because I was not supposed to be a combatant. The Silver Star goes to a combatant. Later they rescinded the Navy and Marine Corps medal and upgraded it to a Silver Star but at that time I had another Silver Star for action on Iwo Jima so I got two Silver Stars.

**You mention in your book that you played some role in the battle for Hill 500. How did that play out?**

There were a couple of battalions that tried to take Hill 500 on their own for 2 or 3 days. Hill 500 happened on D plus 5, the day after the amputation incident. Our battalion had replaced this battalion that had been trying to take Hill 500 and had been pretty well worn out. We got all set up with a lot of pre-attack artillery. I set up my aid station. The only chance I had to put up my aid station was way out in front. The shells were passing over our heads and I kept going trying to find a place to set up the aid station. Actually, we went pretty close to a thousand yards until we found an old farm house that had some cement walls. I set up my aid station there and this was before the time the colonel called and started the battalion's attack. I called him back and said, "Colonel, the aid station is ready. You man start the attack." He got a kick out of that.

COL Evans !, was an observer and he thought that our battalion's attack on Hill 500 was the best he'd ever seen. Whether we were a better fighting unit or whether the Japanese had pulled out of Hill 500 that night, I don't know but we hit them hard and quick and in just a few hours we had taken Hill 500. It had been holding up another bunch of marines for more than 2 days.

**Did you have a lot of casualties to treat?**

We had 49 casualties including 9 killed. We evacuated the wounded back along the railroad track we had come up on. Some of the jeeps were fitted to go over this rough ground and we'd load them up and send them back first to the division hospital and then they send them to the hospital ships.

**Didn't you treat COL for a wound?**

That happened several days later when we were moving... We had made a flanking left move and were going up the right flank of the whole island when we ran into a bunch of Japanese in prepared positions and it was one of the roughest days that we'd ever had. I had over 100 casualties that day. That's a lot of work. That's not counting the ones who were killed that had to be evacuated later. COL was an observer that day and he got a shrapnel wound in his left arm near the elbow. He came into my aid station along with several other marines. I splinted him, treated him with sulfa and morphine, and evacuated him just like my other casualties.

**Did you have a conversation with him?**

I was too busy to carry on much of a conversation. I knew who he was and he knew who I was. I said, "I'm glad to have you here colonel but not under these conditions."

**How much help did you have in that aid station?**

I had another doctor and about 10 corpsmen. The rest of the corpsmen were out with the Marine companies.

**You were also wounded on Saipan. What happened?**

It was a wound that was classified as a wound but I have no scar to show for it. The whole battalion was walking up a hillside, a rather rough road to the top, and our artillery was firing over our heads to the far side where the Japanese were. We had to take the ridge in order to shoot down on them. Our guns were firing right over our heads because you could hear the fluttering sound of the shells going overhead. The shells were landing about 200 yards in front of us. A friendly shell landed short down below me to my left and the explosion flipped me up and over in sort of loose cartwheel. I was unconscious and don't remember anything about it. They said I was unconscious about 10 minutes, woke up, and was whoosy for several more hours. I was deaf in my left ear and was bleeding from that ear and my nose. I had a splitting headache but I didn't have any shrapnel wounds so I didn't have any scar to show for it. But it cleared up in about 2 or 3 days. I understand the colonel wanted me to be evacuated but I was awake enough at that time to argue him out of it. He was too busy otherwise to argue with this crazy medical officer so he let me stay. My left ear stayed deaf for several weeks and improved but I'm still partially deaf in that ear. That's the story of my purple heart "For wounds received in action against the enemy of the United States." It happened on the 4th of July 1944.

**One of the things you mention over and over in your book was the dreadful sanitation situation on Saipan.**

The worst part about it was the flies. We did what we could to take care of all our Marine casualties--the dead--but there were a lot of Japanese dead that we sort of pushed aside because we didn't have time to take care of everybody. And there were a lot of dead farm animals too. Within a few days, we had billions of flies. In the morning after the sun started coming up, these swarms of flies would rise from the ground. As it got warmer in the next 20 or 30 minutes the swarm would rise higher and higher until it got about 5 or 6 feet above the ground and then the flies would disperse--just boom--and the whole cloud would be gone. They were all over the place. You couldn't do anything. You'd try to eat something and the flies would be all over the food. You'd be shooing the flies away with one hand while you'd shovel the food in your mouth. Many times it wouldn't work and you'd end up spitting flies out. Of course, it was a terrible sanitation problem. Very quickly we had all kinds of gastrointestinal illnesses--diarrhea in particular.

**What kind of flies were they?**

Ordinary house flies, the kind you see around any garbage dump.

**You probably had to contend with these flies when you were trying to dress wounds.**

It was terrible. In fact, we found that maggots from flies will clean a wound. They will debride the wound because they only eat dead tissue. Even though a wound was contaminated and wiggling with hundreds of maggots, the wound was clean.

**How did you get to Tinian?**

Tinian is very close to Saipan. After the battle of Saipan we were getting ready to go to Tinian. We could sit on the south shores of Saipan and see Tinian. It was only a few miles away, close enough for long range artillery. Of course, the aerial and naval bombardment was also taking place. We reorganized on Saipan after the battle, got aboard ship, and landed on Tinian.

**Did you go by LST?**

Yes. But this landing a little different. We didn't have to go over the side of a ship into a landing craft. We were combat loaded inside the hold of the LST and great big doors at the bow opened up and we drove right out into the ocean. We didn't even have to get our feet wet. We landed ashore and climbed out of the landing craft.

**What kind of reception did you receive from the Japanese?**

We landed on a very tiny beach. Actually, the Japanese were fooled. They expected the landing to be farther to the north around Tinian Town, where there were good sandy beaches. We actually landed on two beaches, one only about 50 yards wide and the other just a little wider. We had to land in columns of companies instead of battalions. The beach was rocky and there were a lot of mines buried in the sand and a few machine gun positions. It was a defended beach but we got ashore. There were a lot of casualties and some of the landing craft hit these mines and were blown up. It was a terrible situation. A several ton landing craft would be blown 10 feet into the air. There were a lot of concussion casualties as well as gunshot and shrapnel wounds.

**How did you treat concussion casualties?**

If it was bad concussion they were unconscious. They might not have had bleeding wounds but they were unconscious from the blast. There's not much to do for them except get them out of the line and evacuated back to the ship where they could be taken care of. Many would recover with time, sometimes in a matter of minutes or hours--with just a headache.

It's pretty hard to prove that a single explosion did the job when you're not "wounded." Wounded to a lot of people means that you got a broken bone or injury to the muscle and skin and that you're bleeding. But you can have a wound--as my wound was--without any blood loss at all.

**How many medical people did you have helping you on the beach at Tinian?**

We had a pretty good first aid unit. We had all our equipment and all our personnel and we had a functioning unit. I had about 8 or 10 corpsmen with me and the rest of the corpsmen were with the companies of the battalion. We had good supplies and equipment.

**Where did you set up your aid station?**

We went inland about 600 yards and found an old farmhouse with concrete walls. We were actually well protected by cement walls. After we had taken care of the casualties from the landing it was pretty quiet the rest of that evening and night until 3 o'clock in the morning when we had a full scale banzai attack.

**What was that all about?**

It was very interesting. It was pretty dark and we could hear several small Jap tanks out in front of us. And then some Japanese soldiers hit our right flank. Before 3, they were able to

bring a couple of artillery pieces and kept coming in small groups or individually. But about 3 they attacked us with full force, particularly in K Company. It was a wild situation. Anybody running around was a Japanese. The Marines stayed down in their fox holes and anybody up and moving around was shot. There was firing in every direction. The Japanese were running right over our aid station. My corpsmen were shooting as fast as they could see them. You didn't dare go above ground because somebody would shoot you.

**I had read somewhere that the Japanese came through yelling and screaming at the tops of their lungs.**

Oh yes. They were whooping and hollering banzai along with other things. By morning light we could see each other and established contact with the companies. We had about 500 enemy dead in our lines and another hundred dead inside the perimeter. We lost about 20 men that night but the Japanese lost about six or seven hundred in our battalion area alone. And it was a similar situation in the other battalions. By Tinian, our battalion was pretty good about keeping down and they were well disciplined. We were blooded Marines by that time.

**You said your corpsmen were shooting back. Were they armed with carbines?**

They weren't supposed to be armed at all but I told them that if they wanted to arm themselves to go ahead and do it. You couldn't protect yourself by throwing bandages at people. I told my corpsmen that if they armed themselves, they would have to carry their weapons along with all their corpsmen's gear. And they did. I had one corpsman who found a Thompson submachine gun. He was a jeep driver.

**So most of the others had either .45s or carbines.**

Yes. Most of them had handguns or carbines. A couple of them had rifles but they were too big and awkward to handle. I told my men to take off all that red cross stuff--no arm bands, nothing on their helmets. I told them not to identify themselves as corpsmen. The Japanese were shooting particularly corpsmen and radio operators. Those were their favorite targets. My boys looked like ordinary marines.

**What was the followup to Tinian? How long did you stay after the battle?**

That was pretty much the battle of Tinian. After that we walked down to the end of the island, which is about 5 or 5 miles long. We had very little problem. Actually, the Japanese kept moving backwards to the cliffs and then they began jumping off the cliffs like they had at Saipan.

The battle of Tinian was pretty much the first day and night. We were there about 9 or 10 days and then got back aboard ship and went back to Maui to our base camp. We rested awhile; they didn't push us too hard for about a month. Then we started another training program and had replacements of our casualties. We were getting ready for our next battle. We didn't know that it was going to be Iwo Jima. We didn't find that out until we were aboard ship on our way.

**Was the training any different for Iwo Jima than for the earlier campaigns?**

No. We had been through it all before--at least the old timers had. Of course, we now had a lot of replacements--marines and corpsmen--who were young men who had never been in combat before. We had to train them to do the job that had to be done. That was the big job. We knew what we were going to do and had been through it before.

As I said, we didn't know where we were going next. We hadn't even heard of Iwo Jima. They had a model of the island on the ship and we learned exactly where we were going to land and what we were supposed to do.

**How was this news given to you? Did you assemble somewhere on the ship?**

The ship was absolutely jam-packed with people. There wasn't any room down below. We used the open deck for classes. The Marines tried to sleep on deck but there wasn't any room up there either. And it was hot. This was in the Pacific and it was not very pleasant below decks.

**Was an APA?**

Yes, but I forget the name of it.

**How long did it take to get to Iwo from Hawaii?**

It must have been about 3 weeks. We stopped temporarily at Saipan, which by then was a rear base, and by that time there were officers clubs and so on. The guys were able to go ashore and have a couple of beers and so on. They told us Navy men assigned to the Marines that we had to pay our mess bill. Navy men attached to the Marines had mess bills but Marine officers were not charged mess bills. It was over a month since we'd been paid. The mess officer wanted us to pay. I told him we didn't have any money and he said we couldn't leave the ship until we paid our mess bill. I told him that was fine with us.

Anyway, they let us out at Saipan and we had to steal a jeep to go over to the Second Division quartermaster and finally convince him to give us some money so we could pay our mess bill.

**When you got to Iwo Jima, could you see the bombardment going on?**

Oh, yes. The convoy going over there was just unbelievable. It must have been five or six hundred ships of all kinds. If you were a giant, you could have hopped, skipped, and jumped and never gotten your feet wet. We woke up the next morning and there was the island in front of us, just like the model we had been looking at for 3 weeks. Suribachi, the volcano was on the left and the high ground on the right. And they were being hit by the aerial and naval bombardment. It was almost like a motion picture. The day was beautiful. We got up about 3 o'clock and it was dark then, but we could see the flashes of exploding bombs ashore. And with daylight, you could see the whole island from one end to the other. And we knew exactly where we were going to land. It was a well organized landing.

**What beach were you supposed to land on.**

The Third Battalion, 25th Marines landed on the far right. We were as far right as you could go. The Fourth Division landed on the right. The Second Division landed on the left and their job was to go straight across the island, then swing left and go up and take Suribachi. The Fourth Marine Division was to go across the island, swing right and start the campaign toward the high ground on the right side of the island.

**How did you get ashore?**

By that time, I was not with the battalion. I had been promoted to assistant regimental surgeon. D-day, h-hour was about 8:30 in the morning and it was about 3 or 4 in the afternoon

when I left the ship and got into the boat with the regimental officers. The regimental commanding officer said, "Mike, when we get ashore, you take over the Third Battalion because there's been a casualty." So as soon as we landed I found the Third Battalion and took over as the medical officer. The guy that had replaced me, Dr. Ken Murray, had been killed almost immediately when he landed. A big shell landed nearby and blew both his legs off. I didn't see him but was told later. He was still alive when they evacuated him but he died an hour or so later. For the grace of God, that would have been me.

**I've heard descriptions of the black volcanic sand and how difficult it was to move. How do you remember it?**

It wasn't really sand; it was volcanic ash and it was very loose and hard to walk in. It was in a series of tiers--four or five tiers--and they were 3 or 4 feet high, and then a flat area of about 10 feet, and then another tier 3 or 4 feet higher, and so on. And you couldn't run in this stuff; you had to crawl. All the wheeled vehicles immediately bogged down. They had brought in mesh to put down so that the wheeled vehicles could make a little headway. But a lot of them would get off the mesh and immediately bog down. The harder they'd try to go forward, the deeper they would get into this sand. Also, the ocean was very rough and a lot of boats, instead of being able to unload their cargoes and marines and back off, were broached and were piled up sideways on the beach. It was one holy mess! Not only a mess, but then other boats couldn't get in with their supplies. It was real touch and go there for several hours until they got enough of this mesh in to make some progress for the wheeled vehicles.

In the meantime, the Marines had crawled ahead and maybe gotten a hundred yards or so inland. We were being bombarded by these big mortars; I guess they were mortars. Some of these were as big as barrels coming through the air. You could see them tumbling. Fortunately, most of them didn't land on the island. They shot over the island and landed in the ocean.

**How did your role as regimental surgeon differ from battalion surgeon?**

At that time I was back in the battalion and was a battalion surgeon again. There were two doctors with each battalion and two with the regiment, so there were eight doctors with each regiment. With the battalion our role was to give first aid treatment to wounded marines by dressing the wounds, stopping the bleeding, administering morphine. We had morphine syrettes, which had a half a grain of morphine; that's a big load of morphine but it took that much for these big, healthy marines to get some effect for pain relief. We had plasma to treat the shock patients, and we did all that as fast as we could and evacuated them back to the beach and back to the boats to get them back aboard ship.

**What kind of shelter did you have to do all this?**

We didn't have any shelter. We were right in the open exposed in a big shell hole in the soft sand. In fact, that night it was raining and cold. It wasn't freezing cold but when it gets down in the 40s and you'd been working hard all day and you're sweaty, why that's cold. We were told it was going to be tropical. It was reasonably warm in the daytime but it was unpleasantly cold at night.

**What do you remember about that first night besides the cold?**

After we treated the marines we had, things did quiet down for a while and we were able to evacuate the wounded back to the beach so the beachmaster could get them aboard ships. The

ships were firing star shells and they were so bright it was like a moonlit night. But when they went out it was darker than ever. You couldn't see anything. We also had an ammunition dump down on the beach about three or four hundred yards away. It was hit and exploded for about 30 minutes firing shells all over the place. We had to take cover from our own ammunition.

**You mentioned that you had plasma. Did you ever see whole blood or serum albumin being used at Iwo Jima?**

We had some serum albumin but it was mostly plasma. The whole blood was for the hospital and they weren't ashore yet.

**Do you recall what kind of medical bag you carried?**

The battalion aid station had several bags we used. They weren't very big and we really didn't have many instruments. We had a few hemostats, bandages, and sulfa powder in little packets of 5 grams each. That was enough sulfa to fit in the palm of your hand and was usually enough to dust into an open wound. We also had splints for broken bones and plasma. It was pretty hard to get into a vein sometimes for intravenous infusion of plasma because these guys were in shock and the veins had collapsed. The needle we had to give the plasma was a pretty good sized needle--a 15 gauge needle as I recall--and if you couldn't find a vein.... After all, it wasn't the ideal operating room conditions either. You were being shot at, it was cold and rainy, and so on so it was pretty hard to find the vein. It was a first aid operation.

**And you had volcanic ash blowing all over the place.**

The wounds were all dirty and my hands were dirty. I didn't have an opportunity to wash my hands very often. It wasn't ideal aseptic conditions.

**How long was it before you saw any hospital ships offshore?**

The hospital ships were there but they were miles out to sea. They had to protect themselves from being fired on. We could see them but they were a long ways away. It took surface craft at least 30 minutes to an hour to get the wounded out to the hospital ships. Actually, the wounded did not go to the hospital ships. They went back to the LSTs, cruisers, and battleships. The hospital ships didn't come in too close.

**You mentioned in your book that you treated a Colonel Chambers who was badly wounded. Could you describe what happened?**

This about D plus four and the battalion had been fighting pretty hard and we were exhausted, not having much sleep. About 4 o'clock I got word that COL Chambers had been wounded. He wasn't too far away from me in a forward battalion observation post about a hundred yards out in front. He had put his head up to see what was going on. There were cliffs and caves all around. The problem was that when you put your head up to see who was shooting at you you'd get shot at from two other directions. He got shot through the chest.

As I said, he was only about a hundred yards away over very rough, rocky, hilly ground higher than I was. I took two corpsmen and a stretcher and crawled forward. We didn't dare stand up because we would have been shot. We got Joe on the stretcher and I was able to look at him. He was shot through the chest with a very serious wound and awake but going into shock. He's a big man about 6 foot 3 inches and weighed over 200 pounds. We put him on the stretcher and didn't dare stand up or even stoop over. We had to drag him which is not very good for a

wounded man going into shock. But we finally got him back to the aid station where I could examine him a little bit better.

I dressed his wounds. He had one sucking chest wound and I was able to stop the sucking. I gave him about 3 units of plasma, dressed the wound, gave him some morphine, and then got him aboard an amphibious truck called a DUKW.

It was after 4:30 now and we were pretty far north. And this was in February and it gets dark pretty early. With darkness, the beachmaster shut the beach down. Nothing would come in or go out after dark. So I had to get COL Chambers back to the beach so he could back to a ship and an operating room where he needed to be right away.

I got him aboard this DUKW and the young black kid who was driving said he wouldn't go back to the beach because they were shooting people down there. And that's when I pulled out my .45 and said, "Somebody's going to get shot up here if you don't get back into that truck and drive these casualties (I had about four or five at that time) back to the beach right now." And he did. Joe got back there and it was getting dark. By this time it was about 5 o'clock. I went with him and got him aboard a boat that took him out to a ship where he could get operated on. If we hadn't done that he wouldn't have survived 2 or 3 more hours. He would have been dead by morning.

#### **He survived?**

He survived. In fact, later on, several years later he came to Ashville and visited me.

#### **That must have been quite a reunion.**

It was. We got together with COL Bob Putnam, who was our exec officer. He had been on Guadalcanal and had joined us in North Carolina during our training and COL Putnam had terrible asthma. He was all right for a while and then would get these terrible attacks and I would have to give him intravenous injections. I told him when we got to California that I heard I was going to have some real bullet and shrapnel casualties and I didn't want any sick people around. I wasn't going to permit him to go. He was a real gung ho Marine and was all ready to go back into combat. But that started 2 1/2 years of hospitalization for him. Strangely, he was in Ashville and was a neighbor of ours when the war was over. He had forgiven me by that time, probably realizing that I had saved his life.

#### **You got another Silver Star for what you did at Iwo Jima. What was that for?**

That was for what I did for COL Chambers. He wrote it up and they gave me a Silver Star. Actually, by that time it was a second Silver Star because the one I got for Saipan, which was a Navy Marine Corps Medal, had been upgraded. I have a Silver Star and then a Gold Star that I can wear on the ribbon in lieu of a Second Silver Star. I don't wear them very often.

#### **Did you have any combat fatigue cases?**

Yes. We had quite a few combat fatigue cases. It was kind of hard to handle. I had an argument with the colonel back on Saipan and Tinian. He wasn't convinced that some of these guys were as bad off as they appeared to be. Each case required individual examination. And it was very difficult sometimes to separate the marines who were truly sick from those who were just "sick and tired," and to give proper attention to the truly psychotic patients. After all, we were all, to some degree, combat fatigued. But the fact that I had been with them in combat and had not ridden in the jeeps and trucks when they were walking, and that our aid station was up

front and close to them, and that I was were right with them when they were wounded, this paid off when the going got rough. They knew that I was on their side and that if they were really sick or wounded and they couldn't function, that I would take care of them. So I would say that this man is combat fatigue. I didn't ask the colonel. It figured that was a medical and not a line officer's decision. I didn't ask him; I just evacuated the patient. When I said that a man was unfit for duty, I didn't have to defend my medical opinion to the colonel or anybody else. It didn't come to that very often but when it did my decision stood up. I think the scuttlebutt went back to the Marines, even to the lowest private, not to try to put anything over on the doctor but if you're really unfit for duty he'll take care of you.

**Did you encounter any of the C-47s that came in to evacuate casualties?**

No. All our casualties were sent back to the beach and back to the ships.

**In your book you mention that after Iwo Jima you had some bad feelings about the way you were being treated, not by the Marine Corps, but more the Navy. You said you had been through four d-days and it was time to let somebody else take over. What were your feelings about the Marine Corps?**

I had mixed feelings. I had had four d-day landings and I was really pushing my luck, having come out of them unwounded and unscathed. It was just unbelievable good luck and I didn't think that that luck was going to last forever.

**You must have been wondering when all this foolishness was going to stop, at least as far as you were concerned. You had already seen a lot of combat.**

After Iwo Jima I went to the division surgeon. I told him I wasn't going to go on any more invasions. He said, "What do you mean you're not going to go?"

I said I just wasn't going to go on any more invasions. I told him I had been on borrowed time four times and was lucky to still be alive and I just wasn't going to go. He could send somebody else. He told me I couldn't do that. I said, "Just watch me." I told him he could call me a coward, he could get me court martialed for dereliction of duty, anything he wanted, but I just wasn't going to go. I told him I was going to sign myself out as combat fatigued.

I thought that I and several doctors in my position were being treated rather badly. There were young doctors coming in to the service. Let them do the landings. We'd train them. The Marine officers of the regiment were very considerate and understanding and sent my request for change of duty. I wanted to get back to a hospital ship or hospital on land somewhere for some surgical training. After all, I was supposed to be a surgeon rather than just a high paid corpsman in the field. And I didn't think two doctors to a battalion was the proper use of the doctors. We were just doing first aid. We weren't doing much in the way of doctoring and what we had been trained for. I was getting more and more angry, particularly since we were being trained for yet another d-day landing, this time for the invasion of Japan. I really thought my time was up. I wouldn't survive another landing. And this is when I had my argument with the division surgeon. He said he would take it under consideration that the old timers--the doctors who had been on three or four landings wouldn't have to go again. But we didn't believe him. The only thing that probably saved me from going to Leavenworth is the fact that the war ended. I mean that seriously. I wasn't going to go. I felt that if I made another landing I was going to be a casualty myself. There were four officers who had been going to the daily mass. Father [Roderick] Hurley was the regimental Catholic chaplain and he had a daily mass. Jim Hovey,

who was killed on Tinian, Sam ----- who was killed on Iwo, and Ken Murray, who was killed on Iwo, and I went to this daily mass. When I got back from Iwo Jima, I was the only one left. I really had the premonition that my time was up. Fortunately, the war ended.

**Where were you when you heard about the bomb?**

We were on Maui. You asked me about serving with the Marines. These Marines were marvelous men and I was real proud to be with them.